IMMANUEL - GOD WITH US
John 1:1-14, 3:16
December 23, 1979

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In Heywood Broun's charming short story, A Shepherd, the angels have departed, the dim winter starlight and silence now surround the shepherds as they decide to go to Bethlehem.

A young shepherd, Amos, however decides not to go. The others are astonished, and then angry - "You heard the tidings," they say; "It is true! A savior is born." "I will abide," Amos answers. The oldest and wisest shepherd takes him aside: "You do not understand...We have a sign from God." But still Amos says, "It is not in my heart. I will abide."

And now the older shepherd and all the rest taunt and tease him for his insistence upon something more. As they leave for Bethlehem Amos calms and tends the frightened sheep. At dawn they return telling excitedly about the remarkable night: the Kings, Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh, and the Child. Tauntingly they ask - "Did you see wonders here in the fields with the sheep?" Amos showed them the baby lamb he had helped to birth during the night. The oldest asked scornfully, "Was there for this a great voice out of heaven?" Amos smiled and nodded his head, and said, "To my heart there came a whisper." (E.S.Smith, The Christmas Book of Legends and Stories, p.123).

That intriguing story poses a most important and fundamental question: "Where is the Holy?" Perhaps the most consistent human tendency is to isolate the sacred from the rest of life. On that night long ago was the presence of God in Bethlehem exclusively, or was it on the hillside as well, as an old ewe bore a lamb? I think a case can be made that all the important human questions grow out of that one...What is the nature of humankind? Who are we? What is the value of human life? Where are we headed? Or more specifically religious concerns: What is God like? How can we communicate with Him? How shall we live? All of that, it seems to me, is answered on the basis of how we address the fundamental question posed in Heywood Broun's story. To what extent is the Holy on the hillside as well as the manger?

It has been maintained, for instance, that the fundamental difference between the cultures of East and West grows out of the way this question is answered. I couldn't help but reflect on that fact as I read the Sunday Times Magazine cover article several weeks ago about Tibetan Buddhism:the gorgeous statuary, the jeweled idols and the ascetic discipline. There is much about Buddhism which is admirable, a gentleness and humility that is Christlike. But the sacred in Buddhism, God if you will, is remote, unreal; characterizations of the divine are a bit bizarre; multiple limbs extend from a jeweled body. The practice of the religion is essentially otherworldly; the direction and focus is away from the material world, and the goal is nirvana, a blissful state unfettered by the stuff and matter of this world. Or the difference may be seen again in the Hindu Holy Man so removed from the world that he is impervious to pain; or, in a sense, the Shiite Muslim determined to provoke a "Holy War" so he can enter God's presence having been martyred in his defense. It is our attitude about the world, what they perceive as totally corrupt materialism that is so offensive to the dedicated muslim.

How totally, philosophically, different that is. How dramatic the difference in the location of the Holy revealed by our symbols: on the one hand, the gold encrusted Buddha with emeralds for eyes and a ruby in his navel, and on the other hand a completely ordinary human birth, in a barn, with hay and animals and totally mundane effects.

The Greek answer to the fundamental question again put the sacred outside the realm of normal humanity. The gods of Greek mythology are known by their "apatheia", their perfect tranquillity which is unaffected by human beings. In Greek philosophy, Aristotle postulated God's perfection and proved logically that in order to be God he must by "unmoved by the motions of the world".

In contrast to that the Christian faith proposes a radical alternative. It is first articulated by the author of the Fourth Gospel. "The Word became Flesh and dwelt among us." That's where the Holy is - not in a statue, shrine, temple, but - in the flesh, in this world, in humanity's most human activities - like being born. Later in the same Gospel the author proposes the rationale: "God so loved the world that he gave his only son." The incredible thing about John 3:16 is not that God gave his only son, but that He loved the world.

God - Almighty, Creator, Lord of heaven and earth - is a lover: God is hopelessly infatuated, in love with the world. That is our genius. That is the most important statement in the language of humanity. The Holy is here! God loves the world! God loves people! In spite of the fact that a lot of our religion comes off looking and sounding like Buddhism in a button down shirt, directed away from life, and in spite of the fact that heaven keeps sounding like nirvana, and the Christ-life keeps appearing to be available only to the person who at least dislikes the world and human activities and his own body, in spite of that, our genius is God's passionate love for this world, and our love, reflecting His.

The Incarnation - Jesus, Son of God, in the cow barn, the heavenly Word become human flesh - is our genius and the beginning point from which we answer the important questions.

From the enfleshing of the Holy we conclude that flesh is good stuff, that the world is a good place, that the ancient Jews were absolutely correct in their Genesis statement, "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." We keep tilting to the East, or at least in the direction of those misguided Greeks who taught that body means bad, spirit means good. This pornographic obsession that permeates our culture is anything but a celebration of the body. In fact, it is the reverse; a sad denial of goodness in favor of pictures, artificial representations. The Incarnation means that humanity is good enough, essentially good enough, to be the expression of God's eternal Word.

The Incarnation, our genius, means that religion has to do with this world. We have trouble with this one. Somewhere we got the idea that the religious life is an other worldly life. Perhaps it was the model of the Hindu Holy Man on his bed of nails: more than likely it was that extension of Greek dualism, the celibate priesthood. Whatever its source, the idea that the Christ-life is another worldly life is heretically alive and well among us. The Pilgrim Separatists were afraid to love their own children too much, afriad that God would not be pleased if they loved anyone but Him that deeply, and H.L.Mencken once defined a Puritan as a person who was afraid that someone, somewhere, was having fun. But, because of the Incarnation, we know that right religion has to do with human life, all of human life, that we Love God best by loving, valuing, respecting other human life. In terms of time, the Incarnation means that God values all of it, not just Sunday morning. In fact, because of the Incarnation, this hour, religiously, is the least important hour of the week. God cares, not nearly as much about the syntax of our prayers, the orthodoxy of our creeds, or the harmony of our hymns, as He does about the way we affirm our spouses, and nurture our children, and embrace one another, and welcome the stranger and feed the poor.

Colin Morris, delightful English Methodist, writes: "When have I known personally the peace of God? Not, I'm afraid, in the cloistered quiet of some retreat house, for I am one of those hyperactive Christians who when asked to be still and contemplate in silence the Being of God tend, to their shame, to nod off. I have only been sure of the peace of God as I have attempted, however pathetically, to do a deed of reconciliation." (Bugles In the Afternoon, p.47).

The Incarnation submits that God is in the world, that the focus of religion

is the world and that the church, therefore, will embrace the world and be in the world as thoroughly as a human birth happening in a barn. Now there is a great temptation to turn East and away from a world which is not entirely pleasant, and in the process to forget the passion of God and the enfleshing of His Word. The temptation often disguises itself as orthodox religion. It says things like - "The church shouldn't be involved in politics", or "let the business community decide that," or "the scientists will take care of it," or "that's a legal matter, let the police and courts handle it." The temptation, in the disguise of religion, would very simply deny the Incarnation by walling off our piety from the rest of life, particularly the important and therefore the controversial parts. If God wanted that, the Incarnation would have happened in the Holy of Holies of the Temple instead of a cow barn out back of a commercial establishment in the middle of a political census. The Social Gospel need not embarrass us. It doesn't belong to those peculiar Christians who lean toward social activism. The Social Gospel is the only Gospel there is. A religion that has no feelings about, no positions on, no mission within the world at its worldliest, cannot very well claim the name of one born in a stable and crucified on the town garbage heap.

The Incarnation, our genius, means that God loves humanity and that He makes himself vulnerable to and for humanity. We are the only people in the world even to approach so preposterous a suggestion. God puts himself at the disposal of humanity. At Christmas we even venture that God's love expresses itself in need. Jesus needed a mother, a father, human love. God who loves us needs our love even as we need His. Aristotle said it couldn't be. If he wanted to be God, he couldn't become vulnerable. Albert Camus, who spent his literary life wrestling with the issue came down on the side of Aristotle concluding that "God remains completely unaffected by the ills that befall us and is the eternal bystander whose back is turned to the woe of the world." (See Schubert Ogden, The Reality of God, p.57).

We need desperately, even the atheist concedes, to know that we matter: that our suffering is of some consequence to someone other than ourselves, that our little victories warm some heart other than our own, that someone stands with us in life, and will walk through a dark valley with us one day and welcome us home in a joyful reunion of family love. The Incarnation is the daring suggestion that God, born among us, is one of us, and is affected and does care and will forever care.

It is our genius, the Word made Flesh, and in its dearest, most honest expression it is an invitation to love the world. German Theologian Jurgen Moltmann wrote simply: "Only he who loves the earth and God in the same breath can believe in the Kingdom of God." (The Passion for Life, p.42). Not God instead of the world, or God in contrast to the world, but God and the world in the same breath. I think sometimes that happens to us at Christmas even though we could not put it into words. There is something about a baby that brings out the best in us. At Baptism we relax and smile and you become more responsive, and sometimes laugh out loud...There is something about a baby that makes us terribly aware of the precious gift of life. There is something about the birth of a child that calls a powerful love for life out of us. There is seomthing about a young woman, heavily pregnant, that is rarely and sensually beautiful. There is something about a father holding his child which affirms at a level too deep to articulate the goodness of the arrangement. Christmas is an invitation to love the world as intentionally and passionately as God does. A baby born in the midst of hay and the strong odor of animals, and the heat of their bodies, and the light of a candle; a baby wrapped in rough cloth, covered with a sheep skin, whose first bed was wood and hay; whose companions taught him about life, who loved what little boys love about the world, who grew to manhood and learned to love and strive and hope and weep and die - the whole gorgeous panorama invites us to love it all, to embrace our life and to reach out in gratitude to those we love and to pull them close and to love and laugh and hug everything of this beautiful world which God gives to us.

So God was on the hillside as a lamb was born, even as He was in Bethlehem that night. The Holy is here, in our midst. The Word became flesh. Bethlehem is not just a sleepy Christmas card town - but a symbol of the world in which you and I must do our living. We will go there, each of us, sometime in the next two days. Please don't make an icon out of Bethlehem. Please do not mistake it for a Holy Shrine.

It stands for the world - your world: life - your life. It represents your relationships, your struggles, suffering, joy and deepest love.

That is where you may expect the Word to become Flesh.

Amen.

Almighty God, Creator of the world, our Maker and Sustainer, we give thanks for the goodness of Your world; for love and kindness, for beauty and compassion; for everything we touch and taste and see and hear. O God, as we approach Bethlehem again, help us to know Your Incarnation, Your dynamic Presence in this world. As we welcome a child, open our minds and hearts to Your creative love. Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.